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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: THE RUSSIAN MFA: AN ANACHRONISM CREEPING TOWARD
THE 21ST CENTURY

REF: 08 MOSCOW 3086

Classified By: Ambassador John Beyrle for reasons 1.4 (b/d).

11. (C) Summary: Dealing with the MFA, the bread and butter of any embassy, takes on peculiar characteristics in Moscow, where the congenial relationships we may develop with individual Russian diplomats are tempered by a hierarchical bureaucracy whose predilection to maintain control of its staff defines, and often impedes, our ability to work with the GOR. Operating from a Stalinist-era landmark that appears destined to keep the MFA firmly rooted in the past, the ministry relies upon outdated communications technology that frustrates our ability to have direct contact with Russian diplomats who decline to provide their office phone numbers, rarely break the injunction against giving out cell phone numbers, and only occasionally use email. The MFA discourages holding outside meetings with foreign diplomats and requires that staff be accompanied to social events. There are exceptions to these rules, and our level of access differs among MFA departments. The Middle East and North Africa Department is notorious within the diplomatic community for its inaccessibility, but even our typically hospitable relationship with the North America Department is hampered by the Russians' reluctance to ease communication. Paired with reftel report on the working conditions of Russian diplomats, we have attempted to illustrate the unique atmosphere that colors our working-level experience of Moscow. End summary.

A Stalinist Monument

12. (U) Housed in an imposing Stalinist-era skyscraper, one of Moscow's famous Seven Sisters, this symbol of the apotheosis of the victorious, post-war Soviet Union was constructed from 1946 to 1953, reportedly with the labor of German POWs. Completed the same year as Stalin's death, and just before the Department's modern building was begun in 1957, the MFA was an anachronism from the time it opened. Still bedecked inside and out with the hammer and sickle and other communist regalia, the lobby includes a single physical testament to the passing of an era in the form of a modest monument to the Russian diplomats killed during the Stalinist purges.

13. (U) American diplomats who complain about the sterility of the Department's Harry S. Truman Building are typically pleased by the MFA's ornate marble and gold leafed lobby, and wood paneled halls and offices. These grand surroundings belie the fact that Russian diplomats continue to work in conditions unchanged from the 1950s, with several staff members sharing open offices lined with worn wood desks without computers. The preponderance of male diplomats, with women in subordinate roles, and wafting cigarette smoke enhances the sense of having entered another era (reftel).

Maintaining Control

14. (C) The MFA is reluctant to allow foreign diplomats unfettered communication with its staff, requiring that nearly all contacts be made through central phone numbers and prohibiting Russian diplomats from providing cell phone numbers. This situation reflects an extraordinarily hierarchical organizational structure that places a premium on rank and the need to control underlings, and may also be intended to allow appropriate monitoring of communications by the security services.

15. (C) While access to the MFA is relatively easy if one has an appointment, security is provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), which has officers at each entrance who can monitor the comings and goings of foreign diplomats. Our meetings with Russian diplomats take place in various places within the MFA, including reception areas, conference rooms, and private offices, suggesting that if our conversations are being monitored the entire building is wired for sound. Holding discussions with foreign diplomats in the cafeteria or other common areas within the building is strictly forbidden in what appears to be an attempt to limit unapproved contacts and the chance that we may overhear conversations. Meeting Russian diplomats outside the MFA occurs rarely, except at official receptions. We understand that our Russian colleagues must receive permission from their superiors before meeting foreign diplomats for lunch, and, if they wish to attend an informal, after hours social event hosted by a foreigner, must be accompanied by a second MFA colleague.

Please Hold.....

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16. (C) The difficulty in contacting Russian diplomats directly is among the greatest frustrations we face. Most do not provide direct phone numbers (many don't have business cards or refuse to provide them), giving only the number to the secretary for an entire department. In a few cases, Russians newly returned from posts abroad have given us direct phone numbers and offered to speak with us anytime, but had to withdraw these offers after being reprimanded for "violating protocol." When calling the central phone numbers provided, it is rare to be transferred to another phone line, and if you hope to speak to someone directly they are often summoned from their office to the secretary's desk. Neither the secretaries nor others in the MFA have multiple phone lines or voice mail, and busy signals are a common occurrence. Secretaries rarely take messages, asking us instead to call back, which requires us to make repeated stalker-like phone calls.

17. (C) An important exception came during the Georgia crisis in August 2008, when the need for constant communication led Russian diplomats to provide us their direct lines and even cell phone numbers, although once the crisis passed, formality returned and all communication once again went through secretaries and general numbers. The MFA does not have an Ops Center-like 24-hour operation, and relies upon duty officers who typically respond that they will pass the message but we should call back during working hours, or on Monday.

Email? Never heard of it.

18. (C) Communicating with Russian diplomats via email is virtually impossible, and our contacts do not suggest reaching them in this manner as entire departments rely upon a general email address that is checked with little frequency. In some cases, diplomats may provide a personal email address that they use for official purposes, but their ability to check these accounts regularly is hampered by the fact that most desktop computers in the MFA do not have

internet access, which is limited to a handful of general terminals. We understand that an internal, Lotus-based email system exists, but is not used by the many technology-averse Russians in the senior ranks who frown upon their junior staff relying upon the internet. Secretaries take dictation for the old guard, and typists continue clacking away.

MFA Department Profiles

19. (C) There are always exceptions to the rules at the MFA, indicating that the organization does not operate monolithically and various offices have a distinctive character that appear to be set by their management:

-- The North American Department (NA) is our main point of contact for discussing bilateral political issues and arranging high-level meetings and phone calls for Washington principals, but is typically out of the loop on bilateral economic matters. While we work well with the NA staff, we have been provided a single phone number for the entire department, which we must use even to reach the desk officer who fields most of our requests. Busy signals often frustrate our ability to respond to short-fuse taskings from Washington.

-- The Middle East and North Africa Department (MENA) is notorious among foreign diplomats who must wait long periods to have appointment requests confirmed or simply ignored. While certain offices within the department are responsive to requests for meetings -- the Israel and Palestine desk is one -- others, such as the Libya desk, have made us wait for weeks to provide a low-ranking official who has little information to offer. Despite years of effort, we have never met the Syria desk officer, and have had to rely upon information gleaned from the Israel and Lebanon desks for our reporting.

-- In contrast to MENA, the chiefs of the Afghanistan, India, Iran, and Pakistan desks in the Second Asia Department are easy to reach by phone (some even give out their direct numbers) and typically available on short notice for meetings. Following important visits, the department has arranged general briefings for the diplomatic corps to avoid a parade of foreign diplomats into their offices for individual meetings.

-- Certain staff in the Department for General European

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Cooperation, responsible for relations with the EU, OSCE, NATO, and the Council of Europe, are IT friendly and willing to talk on the phone, although getting an appointment can take time and may require submitting a list of questions in advance. The Director has requested that we correspond via his personal email account, and the deputy directors and unit heads have internet access at their desks. A senior counselor on the OSCE desk said that he was required to attend a multiple-week training session on using the internet at the MFA's Institute for Diplomacy.

-- The First Asia Department's China desk is approachable relative to other MFA offices, although the Korea desk has taken on the qualities of Pyongyang, proving elusive and even suspicious of third country diplomats. When we recently called the head of the desk via his direct number, obtained from a new staff member who may have violated protocol, he seemed surprised and proved unable to agree to a meeting to discuss North Korea without approval from higher up. We are still waiting for a response.

-- The Department of Security Affairs and Disarmament (DVBR in Russian) is particularly protocol conscious, taking care to pair us with equivalent or lower ranking diplomats, whereas in other departments MFA senior counselors may be the regular contacts of our first and second secretaries. DVBR

is often tight-lipped with information and its staff have come across as hostile when receiving our demarches.

-- The relatively young, female, and technically savvy staff of the Department of New Threats and Challenges reflects its recent formation to deal with terrorism and transnational crime (reftel). The junior diplomats are among the most open to communication via email, have provided us direct phone and cell phone numbers, and shared their frustrations with the MFA's outdated information technology. The department includes staff from DVBR responsible for civilian science and technology issues who were separated from that department at their own request. Civilian nuclear issues remain with DVBR, and the two departments are still sorting out turf issues.

-- Befitting an office staffed with diplomats who served in New York or Geneva, the Department of International Organizations (IO) exudes a professionally convivial atmosphere, in which certain staff have freely provided cell phone numbers and personal email addresses, especially to those they may know from previous posts. Unfortunately, this does not necessarily translate into immediate, substantive answers to UN-related demarches, and IO can push responsibility on certain issues off to other departments. This IO predilection is so notorious that diplomats in DVBR have cautioned us not to let ourselves get brushed off by IO, which also covers environment, technology and health issues for the MFA.

-- Certain offices take on the character of the person heading them, such as the ASEAN office led by a gregarious second generation diplomat who speaks American accented English thanks to his father's long posting to Washington (his brother currently serves at the Russian mission in New York), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization office, the chief of which has even seen us the same day we asked to meet. Once these individuals leave for new posts, we may not be so fortunate, as the MFA still has plenty of Soviet-like diplomats prone to regurgitating talking points.

Comment

¶10. (C) As is the case with any diplomat working abroad, learning how to overcome the impediments inherent in the host country's bureaucracy is a crucial part of the job. In Moscow, this can often be accomplished by establishing personal relationships with those Russian diplomats who are most open to meeting and prove to be engaging interlocutors. Of course, this still requires us to get in the door of the MFA, which does not happen as frequently or in as timely a fashion as we would like. There appears to be a quiet change going on within the MFA, with a willingness by a new generation to adopt information technology, although this still leaves the ministry decades behind the U.S. and Europe and well behind the Russian public's use of the internet.
BEYRLE